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AUTHOR	Machanic, Mindy
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ABSTRACT

The Internet (Net) and World Wide Web (WWW) have developed a variety of cultures and communities. Although most early users of the Net (mostly males) were well-intentioned and well-mannered, their social conventions (some blatantly sexist, others in the nature of macho posturing) have continued in many online chat rooms and virtual gaming environments. Women have not always felt welcome or safe in these areas. Gender harassment and invasions of women's online privacy by men has now gone beyond macho posturing and sexist language. Online classrooms now have many of the same problems as the larger world of the Web. Going beyond "flaming" (blasting someone publicly for something said online), stalking is a potential danger for both students and faculty. Flaming that got out of hand and some forms of sexual harassment in online classrooms have been reported. None of the new online learning technologies address the emerging issues of power, gender, and safety in online classrooms. Instructors should set the tone of conversation, set clear limits on what is appropriate behavior in the classroom, make it clear that flaming will not be tolerated, and make textual postings gender-neutral. There must be some way of getting virtual help if one feels stalked or harassed. Institutional policies need to be developed to treat virtual harassment as a real offense. (Contains 26 references and notes.) (YLB)

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Mindy Machanic

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Machanic, Mindy
Walden University
Education, Professional Psychology
mmachani@waldenu.edu
Completed while Project Manager, Educational Technology & Learning, Technical University of British Columbia (TechBC)

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Introduction

Since the Internet's text-based beginnings a bit over a decade ago, the Internet (Net) and WorldWideWeb (Web) have developed a variety of cultures and communities. Along with the cultures have come community expectations and a set of "manners" for behaving in cyberspace, commonly known as "netiquette," and certain types of responses to infringements of appropriate online behavior. ([1])

As in any community of people, there are those on-line who follow community standards, and those who flaunt convention. As a result, safety issues have followed people into their electronic communities. Concerns range from identity (you never really know who you are talking to when you are on-line) to harassment in chat rooms by 12 year old boys posing as 32-year-old men (and vice versa) ([2]) and on to boundary and privacy violations such as stalking, psychotic episodes online and virtual harrassment.([3])

Women have only recently begun to access online communities in numbers that approach equity with men online ([4]). Many of the accepted online practices grew out of the conversations and community of the mostly male engineers and programmers who were the early developers of the online environment. Although most of these early users of the Net were well-intentioned and well-mannered, they gave little thought to how others might react to their social conventions, some of which were blatantly sexist, while others were more in the nature of "macho" posturing. These conventions have continued in many of the on-line chat rooms and in the virtual gaming environments, and women have not always felt welcome – or "safe" - in these areas. ([5], [6], [7]) Gender harassment and invasions of women's on-line privacy by men has, in some cases, gone beyond macho posturing and sexist language to rating the looks of women who post photos on their homepages and linking these women's homepages to sites of the raters ([8]).

The concerns are not new. By the mid-1990s, ethics, safety, law and policing the Net and the Web had begun to be an issue for parents, educators and community leaders.([9], [10], [11], [12]) Questions arose related to emotional relationships and other interactions online: Who should be responsible for handling virtual crimes in virtual spaces? Does a virtual rape, such as one that occurred in an online community called LambdaMOO ([13], [14]), actually constitute rape, or is a boundary violation in cyberspace not to be taken seriously? How can we protect ourselves emotionally from violation by predators in cyberspace? How do we handle cyberjerks, cyberstalking and privacy invasions in electronic spaces? And how do we allow consenting adults the right to virtual relationships, including virtual sex, when we have no way of telling who is really an adult? Lawyers have started to discuss the legal issues in on-line harassment and other such activities. ([15])However, the Internet has constructed its own methods of enforcing its customs, having to do with the use of power. ([16]).

Why They Do the Things They Do

Most of the relevant literature on harassment and stalking comes from social psychology and social cognition: the role of the social climate in determining what is or is not appropriate behavior in particular situation, and how people see each other in relation to themselves in a given environment. The social construction of harassment and rape in the real world carries over to the social construction of these behaviors in cyberspace. ([17]) Cyberstalkers stalk for the same reasons that real-world stalkers do: power, obsession, or revenge. ([18])

There is one factor that is different in the virtual world: there is no body to give cues to meanings on-line. The fact that anyone can take on any identity in cyberspace has brought out the best and the worst in many people.([19]) The boundaries of the "self" are blurred when the "self" is whoever and whatever one wishes to be at a given time. Therein lies a great sense of freedom to explore alternate personalities, genders and ways of behaving. On the other hand, one's representation in cyberspace is, at least temporarily, a presentation of one's self at that time, and violation of that presentation in some form may present one with a range of emotional states. Hence, the power of the virtual community in maintaining social constructions of appropriate behavior in cyberspace, as in place-based communities. ([20]) Silencing, public rebuke and other forms of censure generally – but not always - keep people from getting too far out of line.

Enter On-Line Learning

As "distance" learning evolved into "distributed" learning with presence in the online environment, some of these problems of virtual gender, power, identity and social expectations followed into the classroom. Initially, online classes were text-based, hosted in listserves (private group discussions through email subscriptions), or on electronic bulletin board systems, where they were easily controlled and limited in their access, with few participants. However, with the development of graphics-based browsers, the explosion of the web opened distributed learning to larger audiences, and the convenience of web-based learning prompted the emergence of more online learning environments. Now, the great majority of educational institutions offer at least some web-based courses, several educational institutions are primarily web-based, and a variety of private education and training programs are offered internationally.

The Net and the Web have fostered a sense of community among participants in a world-wide adventure. ([21]) People have made real friends on-line, and relationships of all types have flourished, with real emotions being involved in the relationships. ([22], [23]) One of the obvious advantages of on-line learning (besides convenience) is the ease of becoming part of a community: join a class, join a learning conversation. We know that social interaction is a major part of knowledge acquisition ([24]); the ease of student and faculty interaction in a facilitative on-line learning environment supports learning conversations, which in turn supports learning. ([25])

Classrooms now have many of the same problems as the larger world of the Web. Going beyond "flaming" (blasting someone publicly for something said online), stalking is a potential danger for both students and faculty. There are homepages on the Web that discuss real cases of cyberstalking that have gone from virtual harassment in chat rooms and Usenet newsgroups to become real-world stalking. While there are no reports of

stalking in on-line classrooms, there are informal reports of flaming that got out of hand, as well as some forms of sexual harassment.

With the development of virtual 3-D worlds, such as one being developed by Technical University of British Columbia, known as TechBC World, the potential for stalking and harassment grows. In a virtual world, avatars can "beam" to places or people, social interactions include gestures such as shrugs and head shakes, and anyone can act however they choose. In an academic environment, this offers the promise of true social interactivity for students who might not otherwise meet, but it also presents issues of safety for all students as well as for staff and faculty.

Interpersonal proximity and control of personal space is considered essential to social interactions; people also impose a set of categories and expectations onto social interactions that are connected not only to belief systems about personal interactions, but also to how patterns of interaction are interpreted. ([26]) Having an avatar "beam in" to suddenly appear right on top of your virtual head can be a scary experience, a virtual invasion of personal space that can feel quite real. Avatars can follow each other around. It is not a stretch to imagine virtual "gangs" harassing individuals in cyberspace, or worse.

These issues need to be considered and discussed before problems become widespread and there is a backlash against the use of online environments for learning. Awareness is the first step. Preparation, education and consensus about proper behavior in cyberspace can provide a structure for coming together in the online learning environment in a way that preserves both individual rights and personal safety. However, talking about it is not enough.

Designing On-Line Classrooms for Safety and Participation

On-line learning has come far enough that we know not to just put lecture notes on-line, add a chat board and call it a class. We know that on-line classes need to be Socratic, facilitative of interaction to enhance learning content, whether they include discussions or simulations. We know that we need to encourage everyone to "speak" by joining the class discussions, and that doing so may mean requiring a minimum number of postings in response to discussion topics. We know that it is possible to do group projects and case-based learning in the on-line environment. Course management software and course environments have become sophisticated enough to allow on-line testing, multiple discussion threads, nested linked pages, and extensive interactive multimedia content. None of these wondrous technologies addresses the emerging issues of power, gender and safety in on-line classrooms.

In Web-based 2-dimensional classrooms, it is up to the instructor to set the tone of conversation, to set clear limits at the beginning of class on what is or is not appropriate behavior in the classroom and in related student areas. Discussions should be set up to enhance interactions, and it should be made clear that "flaming,""one-upping" or silencing of dissenting opinions will not be tolerated in the virtual classroom. Textual postings should be gender-neutral, and realistic graphics should be representative of both genders and a range of ethnicities in nonstereotyped settings. Cartoons and jokes need to be gently humorous rather than hurtful; awareness of the cultural and religious values of all class members can ensure that no one is hurt by these postings.

What is the point of all this "political correctness" in the on-line classroom? If on-line learning is to be successful, then all participants must be interacting with each other. For that to occur, all participants must feel safe. If women, gays, ethnic minorities, or others perceived as "different" do not feel safe, they will not interact fully in the on-line classroom, and less learning will occur, not only for those who do not feel safe, but for those who are deprived of hearing the different perspectives of those who are silenced.
In the 3-D classroom, these needs are part of the environment, but the "physical" presence represented by avatars adds another layer of safety issues. The solutions to these issues are evolving as the technology for virtual 3-D worlds evolves, but built into these environments must be some method of controlling physical proximity; it should be possible to turn off "beam to" so that nobody can come within one's personal space unexpectedly or uninvited. If one feels stalked or harassed, there needs to be some way of getting virtual help, whether by "cop-bots" summoned by virtual panic buttons that look like police call boxes, or by being able to summon a live person with system control who can end participation by an offender, or a group of offenders. As well, institutional policies need to be developed to treat virtual harassment as real offenses.
We hope these scenarios of nastiness and harassment do not occur in on-line classroom environments. However, the psychology of humans in groups indicates that they will. We should do all that we can to design in safeguards to prevent these occurrences in the first place, and put in place procedures for handling them if they do occur.

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